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ABSTRACT

A mail survey of 91 past and present users of the community programing (public access) channels in the Toronto, Canada, area revealed that personal contact is most important in the diffusion of knowledge about access opportunities. Friends and colleagues were the most often cited initial source of information; but contact by the cable company itself most often proved critical for actual user development. This latter point suggests that only when knowledgeable persons make contact and explain matters are such inhibiting factors as lack of understanding of the telecommunication process countered, enabling community groups to effectively use and develop cable television as a medium of public communications. The results of this study strongly point to the necessity of some kind of proactional and facilitating action by expert or professional groups in the development of public access cable television channels. (RL)

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THE USERS OF CABLE TV ACCESS CHANNELS: A STUDY OF THE DIFFUSION AND ADOPTION OF A COMMUNICATIONS INNOVATION

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THE USERS OF CABLE TV ACCESS CHANNELS:

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COMMUNICATIONS INNOVATION

Since the Federal Communications Commission first announced its Access and leased channel requirements for cable television systems,[1] there has been considerable debate concerning the ultimate worth of such facilities. On the one side are arguments to the effect that television is a uniquely "mass" medium, and quite inappropriate for specialized communication. Others, however, forsee the final demise of current television programming patterns, and the emergence of many specialized telecommunication services.[2] The FCC itself, even in modifying its access requirements, appears to remain (publicly at least) dedicated to the idea of expanded Access, and convinced of its future viability.[3] The recent Supreme Court decision denying the FCC authority to require Public Access (Midwest Video-vs FCC, April 2, 1979, 47 LW 4335) yet leaves intact local and state authority, and will probably have limited effect on existing franchises. The Midwest Video case, combined with deregulation activity at the FCC and Communications Act rewrite activity in Congress, however, certainly places the idea and operation of Public Access at a cross roads.

Behind the speculation there exists as yet little empirical data on the operational success of these channels as currently functioning throughout the United States and Canada. Analysis of access programming alone leaves many important questions unanswered. Studies by Gillespie,[4] and the Canadian Radio-Television Commission[5] along with the reports of the National Cable Television Association[6] have provided helpful information on the extent and variety of access channel programming, and success stories are not lacking. Yet it does appear that community response to access channel availability

has not been as enthusiastic as many advocates had thought or hoped it would be. Even in communities where initial response was high, interest often did not last beyond the novelty stage.

A few studies have attempted to measure audience response to access programming, an example being that by Roland Johnson and Don Agostino on the Columbus, Indian Video Access Center. Beginning from the assumption that "neither recognizing the potential of cable television nor requiring systems to make channels available can make public access television an effective channel for communication," Johnson and Agostino found very little audience for the Center's programming.[7] The survey by Othmer in New York City similarly found a low percentage of cable subscribers regularly watching the Public Access Channels there.[8]

Even where audience data might be available, however, it is still less than clear how we should evaluate such. Audience studies alone provide limited information about what might or might not make Access cablecasting successful. Certainly there are many factors to be studied, such as the characteristics of programming and adequacy of promotion. Prior to all such concerns, however, is the matter of the actual production or supply of programming. Audience attraction to access channels will be directly related to the breadth and depth of the programming available. Community interest can only begin to be attracted when those with relevant messages are using the medium to reach their constituent publics.

The issue to which the present study is directed is that of user development; that is, the diffusion and adoption of this new technological innovation among those with public communications needs which might be served thereby. Much more than general awareness is involved, of course. Even where awareness might exist, such does not guarantee that potential users understand the nature of the opportunity available to them. Theodora Sklover

has suggested that this has indeed been one of the major roadblocks in activitating groups to use the public access channels in New York City.[9] As Bednarczyk and Rice have commented:

> Today, local programmers realize that the transition between 'passive' viewers and 'active' user/producers was not the quick and easy process envisioned in 1972. They recognize now that a change in the traditional role for the television viewer demanded more than channel time and a live camera.[10]

Based on our experience to date with access channels, the following factors emerge as real and potential impediments to the development of cable TV use by community groups and agencies.

1. Knowledge Level:

Certainly cable operators themselves have not always been eager to promote use of the Public channels, nor for that matter is it clear that such a responsibility should befall the operator. In lieu of some other initiating group, however, it is easy to understand how knowledge about channel availability might not circulate far. There is also the matter of legal rights. Cable operators in Canada have a legal right to deny access to the Community Programming Channel, operators in the United States do not.[11] Nevertheless, this writer is aware of numerous instances where cable operators, legally required to provide access time, have discouraged would-be users who did not understand the essential illegality of the operator's actions.

2. Attitudes Toward Television's Functions:

The general unavailability of the electronic media for narrowcasting, and the simultaneous long tradition of using the print media for public communications, has quite possibly created a psychological barrier towards equal consideration of television as a public communications tool. Obviously some organizations, in particular political groups, have been quicker to grasp the potential of the medium. But law and economics have always been on their side. It is only since 1972, with the development of community access cable

television, that such opportunity has been available to the larger public in any meaningful sense. And simply being "aware" of the access opportunity does not constitute internationalization or adoption. Mental habits take time to change.

3. Understanding of the Telecommunications Process:

In communications consulting, an unfortunate hot-cold client pattern is commonly encountered. The would-be producer begins with a very simplistic notion of telecommunications, then (often through discouraging trial and error) upon discovering the true demands and complexities of effective production, becomes intimidated and abruptly drops the whole notion. After a rather extensive survey of Community Programming Channel users in Canada, a report by the Canadian Radio and Television Commission concluded:

> Often the energy needed to steer a project through the long process of research, preparation and production is lacking or is in short supply. Several operators have emphasized that many applicants who may at first be very keen to participate, quickly lose their enthusiasm when they see what is involved.....

[12]

Reflecting on similar experiences, Theodore Sklover has noted the importance of "education in the use of the medium" as critical to the long-term acceptance of public access.[13] Awareness, and then even intent to use can still be frusted by imbalanced understanding of the medium itself.

4. Management and Planning Skills:

Functional appreciation of telecommunications does not in itself make an effective producer. Personal consulting experience has demonstrated the difficulty encountered by novice programmers in such matters as determining communications objective. As often as not, production is attempted on the basis of behavioral objectives, leaving unidentified the critical attitudinal or cognitive components which lie behind the target behavior. (Certainly one of the strengths of Childrens Television Workshop has been their con-

stant concern to clearly identify and state programming objectives in terms of mental skills or changes.) Other important ingredients in the telecommunications planning process are understanding of the target audience and matching message to the medium. The point here is that many community groups and agencies will simply lack the staff skills to carry through with such planning, and as a consequence are perhaps thereby discouraged from utilizing the medium.

Such, then, are the types of barriers which can deter potential suppliers of programming for Community Access channels. The extent to which such problems can be compensated for by adequately trained telecommunications specialists, whether they work for the cable company, a local Access center, or community agencies, could have considerable bearing on the extent to which channels are utilized.

The Canadian Radio-Television commission certainly appears to have been sensitive to such problems in formulating the requirement that Canadian cable operators function as "animators" in their respective communities, seeking out potential programmers and directly assisting them in the development and production of materials.[14] Of course the Canadians are not alone in recognizing the advantages of an initiating group. In his analysis of public access in New York City, other noted the importance of "facilitator" groups at least in the early stages.[15] The experience of the Alternate Media Center in both New York and Reading, Pennsylvania further attest to the viability of this approach.[16]

The more precise purpose of the present study, therefore, has been to explore the role of the "Community Animators" of two cable systems in Toronto, the Metro Cable system and the Keeble Cable system. In particular the study has been concerned to discover the extent to which the cable company has been

instrumental in generating interest in the use of public access (that is, the community programming channel) and the extent to which the expertise of the staff is determinative in the actual planning and production of programming. The study also provides data for evaluating the effectiveness of the CRT'S "animator' policy.

Method

As the total number of programming groups for either of the cable companies was quite small at the time of data collection (Spring, 1977), the groups were combined to form a pool of "users". The source lists of users were the records kept by the cable companies, which unfortunately did not extend back beyond 1975. The records themselves were then supplemented through recall by staff members of earlier user groups. The resulting combined list of former and current users of the Keeble and Metro Community Programming Channel included 182 organizations and individuals.

The sample frame thus determined was not, then, the true or full population of channel users. Primarily missing were some group users from before 1975, and some individual, one-time-only users before and after 1975. The staffs at the two cable companies, however, were of the opinion that the lists used represented over 75 percent of actual users since 1975, and an even higher proportion of actual channel use (i.e. programming time.)

A more serious limitation resulting from this methodology is the lack of a reference control group. A more rigorous method would have been to sample from the total population of community groups and associations, and then compare those using the Community Channel with those who had not. The sample used certainly has the problem of self-selection, but this was deemed less critical to the present objective of exploratative case analysis then it would be to a survey with broader generalization objectives.

A mail questionnaire, accompanied by a letter from the respective cable companies, was sent to the sample members. Two follow-up contacts were used to help increase final response rate. The questions themselves were not designed around specific hypotheses, but rather around the general research concerns identified in the above discussion of impediment factors.

Results

The rate of return from the population group (i.e. the sample frame) was 50% (N=91). Of the user returns, 68 (74%) were organizations, while only 23 (25%) were individuals. The organizations themselves were almost equally divided among government, special interest, and public service organizations, suggesting a broadly based use for the Community Programming Channel. Most of the responding organizations indicated multiple use of the Community Programming Channel (Channel 10), with only 13 (14%) indicating they had produced only one program. (This figure might not represent the real picture, however, as apparently "one-shot" users were less likely to be listed in cable company records.)

Respondents were asked to identify their sources of information with regard to Channel 10, and to indicate which of these sources provided initial information, and which was most influential in the decision to utilize the channel (see Table I). Personal contact is by far the most important source of information. Interestingly, contact through a friend or fellow group member is more frequently mentioned as source than is contact by a member of the Cable staff (i.e. the Community Animator). Promotion literature and newspaper listings account for a low contact. This finding validates the conclusions based on the experience of many video centers.[17]

The importance of personal, non-cable company contact is further accentuated when we find that almost half of the groups indicate their initial

contact came through friends or fellow group members, while just over a quarter heard first from the cable company itself. However, when we look at the matter of greatest influence, the figures are almost exactly reversed. Now contact by the cable staff is the most important, and the influence of friends and group members second. Almost a third of those whose first contact was through friends, remained to be convinced by the cable staff (see Table 2).

In an attempt to identify the salient factors or arguments in the decision to utilize Channel 10, groups were asked to state what finally convinced them to become involved with cablecasting. The responses to this open-ended question turned out to be very wide ranging and difficult to interpret (see Table 3). The responses appear to roughly fall into two categories, however: one involves procedural clarifications (no one was censor, there would be help available); the other regards the efficacy of cablecasting (that is, Channel 10 provided a viable channel of communications with the broad public or some specific public.)

To measure the importance of the cable company beyond the "animation" process itself, users were asked to indicate their dependency on the cable company and other sources for both production equipment and production assistance. From Table 4 is is clear that the cable company is heavily depended upon for both equipment and production assistance. A closer analysis of the data revealed that those groups indicating heavy reliance on the cable company for production equipment for the most part indicated very little reliance on other sources of help, such as schools, profes - sional studios, or their own equipment. The reliance on the cable company for equipment, then, is heavy, and rather singular at this point. The dependency for production assistance is more distributed, with volunteer

groups and self reliance both important. At the same time, however, it is clear that the cable company is still heavily involved in most production, as most of the groups indicating reliance on self and volunteer groups also indicated equal reliance on the cable company staff.

To further evaluate the extent of reliance on the cable company, a series of specific questions were asked (see Table 5). Again the heavy reliance for production per se is indicated, with less but still noteable reliance for other aspects of the programming process (ideas, planning, evaluation). One surprise was the heavy reliance on the cable company for program promotion.

To check on the relationship of reliance with group characteristics, a summary "Dependence" score was computed by adding together five of the areas (excluding evaluation). Neither years of programming experience nor type of group corresponds with amount of general or specific dependence on the cable company (see Table 6). The only exceptions to this pattern are the finding of less dependency by ethnic groups for program planning and a greater dependence for getting production help by the older users.

The final series of questions dealt with the users' attitudes towards Channel 10 and community programming itself. Here we find a rather positive orientation. Most users feel that efforts are worthwhile, that the audience is sufficient, that the production process is not too demanding and that the cable operator does not exercise too much control. They do not feel that the channel is being used for "ego trips," and agree that Community cablecasting is going to have an impact on television generally (see Table 7). Similarly, over half of those responding to a general question expressed hope for the future of Community cablecasting, while only 25 percent were negative (the rest hadn't made up their mind yet.) In their hope for the future, these users foresaw increasing professionalism, larger audiences,

and greater channel allocation. Further, no significant differences were found in the attitudes of the different group types, other than the fact that the ethnic and special interest groups are less convinced that it is all worthwhile. Their attitude still remains positive on this point, however. (These results remained constant when controlling for type of group and sources of influence. This positive attitude was further supported in respondent answers to an open-ended question concerning "obstacles" to their use of Channel 10. The cable operator was not mentioned at all.)

Discussion

The results of this case study demonstrate the importance of personal contact in the diffusion of a new communications innovation, Cable Television access channels. Promotion literature, general advertisement, and even the existence of the channel itself are not terribly good sources of information, let alone persuasion. Such findings strongly support suggestions made earlier in this paper that psychological barriers might exist which would mitigate against serious consideration of television for private use by community groups and agencies. It is only when knowledgeable persons make contact and explain the possibilities that knowledge and attitude barriers are effectively countered. It is possible that this situation might change as more and more access or community programming is produced and viewed, but for the present the expert contact seems most important for the development of community programmers.

There is little doubt of the importance of the cable company--its production equipment and staff--in the development of programming for the Community Programming Channel. The anticipated impediment of planning skill deficiency was verified. A potentially most important finding here, though,

is the strength of this dependence over time. It might be hoped that, with experience, community organizations would develop their own telecommunication resources. In a previous comparative analysis of Canadian and U.S. policy with regard to access channels, Sparkes suggested that the Canadian model could discourage initiative and even creativity by community programming groups[13]. The present study provides partial support for that projection. An important question here, however, is that of how much time for experimentation is necessary or desirable before organizations make the investments that effective telecommunications calls for. (On the other side, the great importance of the cable company's production equipment certainly supports the F.C.C.'s policy of requiring cable companies in the United States to have such equipment for community use.)

There are policy implications here for both government and community organizations. Local groups should give serious attention to provisions for establishment or funding of community access centers with trained staff. City governments themselves might consider retention of at least one trained telecommunications specialist to service city offices and agencies. Baltimore's Office of Telecommunications is exemplary of what be done. Certainly in granting franchises, community leaders should give high credit to operator proposals for offering such staff help. Attention is commonly paid to the engineering, economic, or legal aspects of cable TV, but less often to the software side.

Community organizations might be well served through the hiring of telecommunication specialists as well. Existing staff are unlikely sources of creative television programming ideas. Many industry groups have already realized this need[19] but public service and governmental agencies seem less

aware of the benefits from such a staff position.

In summary, then, the results of this study strongly point to the necessity of some kind of promotional and facilitating action by expert or professional groups in the development of community utilization of public cable television. Simply making channels available by the graces of technology and regulation appears to have little effect, at least in the early stages. It should not be surprising, then, that there has been less than anticipated demand for access channels in those U.S. communities where neither the cable operator nor some other private group has made effort to mediate the new opportunities to the general public.

Table 1

Scources of Information

And Influence

	Mentioned as A source of Information	Frequency as First source		Frequency as Most Influential	
A friend	28	24	(44%)	14	(28.6%)
Member of some group	26	16		12	
Promotion	11	5	(17.6%)	1	(6.6%)
Watching Channel 10	20	11		5	
Cable staff	44	19	(20.9%)	40	(44.0%)
Other	16	7	(13.2%)	7	
No Response		8		12	
Total		91	100%	91	100%

Table 2

Initial Source of Information Compared to Most Influential Source

First Source	N	Percent Friend most Influential	Percent Promotion most Influential	Percent Cable Staff Most Influential
Friend or Group member	40	24 (60%)	2 (5%)	14 (35%)
Promotion or Channel 10	16	1 (9%)	3 (18%)	7 (44%)
Cable staff	19	1 (5%)	0	18 (95%)

Table 3

Reason for Deciding to Use Channel 10

	N	Percent	
Procedural clarifications:			
1. Actual availability of Channel 10 ror their use	16	17.6%	42.9%
2. Availability of assistance	23	25.3%	
Efficacy clarification:			
3. For reaching the general public	21	23.0%	32.9%
4. For reaching a specific target audience	9	9.9%	
No Response	22	24.2%	
Total	91	100%	

Table 4

Users Indicating Dependence for Production Equipment and Assistance

	None	Some	Entirely
Production Equipment			
Cable Company	11	19	61
School or College	68	15	8
Professional Studio	78	6	7
Self	60	25	6
Other	85	6	0
Production Assistance			
Cable Company	13	6	2
School or College	50	31	10
Professional Studio	83	6	2
Self	38	41	12
Other	87	4	0

Table 5

User Reliance on the Cable Company

Reliance for	Very Much	Somewhat	Slightly	None	Average Score*
Identifying Program ideas	18	20	19	34	2.24
Planning	17	22	12	40	2.17
Producing	13	19	10	24	2.78
Getting Volunteer help	16	15	11	49	1.98
Evaluation	11	15	14	51	1.85
Promotion	22	25	20	24	2.49

* Very much = 4

Table 6

Association of Dependency on Cable Company With User Characteristics (Cramer's V)

Dependency	Controlled for group type	Controlled for length of use of Ch. 10
Dependence	.21 (NS)	.20 (NS)
Program ideas	.21 (NS)	.23 (NS)
Program planning	.24 (Significant at .05 level)	.12 (NS)
Production	.23 (NS)	.30 (significant at .0 level
Getting Help	.13 (NS)	.25 (significant at .0 level
Evaluation	.19 (NS)	.18 (NS)
Promotion	.1 (NS)	.21 (NS)

*nonlinear, and therefore meaningless.

Table 7

User Attitudes Towards the Community Programming Channel

Effective Means of Communication.....	4.03*
Production is Easy	3.51
Opportunity for Ordinary people to speak	4.26
Will have a big impact on Canadian TV	3.64
Audience size is unimportant	4.23
Audience is large enough	3.29
Too much operator control	3.00
Not worth the time and money	1.78
Most users only want to see themselves	2.02

* Strongly agree = 5

FOOTNOTES

1. FCC, "Cable Television Service; Cable Television Relay Service," 37 Federal Register 3252 at p. 3289 (Washington, 1972 36 FCC 2d 143).

2. The literature on specialized use of cable TV is broad. For one particularly good discussion of programming variety, see Cable Handbook 1975-1976, Mary Louise Hollowell, ed, (Washington: Communications Press, Inc., 1975). See also, NSF, Social Services and Cable TV (Washington USGPO, 1976) Chapter II.

3. FCC, "Report and Order on Docket 20363," (Washington, 1975).

4. Gilbert Gillespie, "Public Access Cable Television in the United States and Canada," (New York, Praeger, 1975).

5. CRTC, "Local Programming on Cable Television: Summer 1972" (Ottawa: CRTC).

6. Cable Services Report, 1978-79. (National Cable Television Association, 1979).

7. Roland C. Johnson and Donald E. Agostino, "The Columbus Video Access Center: A Research Evaluation of Audience and Public Attitudes", (Bloomington, Indiana: Institute for Communications Research, March 1974).

8. David Othmer, "The Wired Island" (New York: Fund for the City of New York, 1973) P. 8.

9. Theodora Sklover, "The Open Door Policy on Television," in Communications Technology and Social Policy, George Gerbner, et. al., ed. (New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1973) p. 328.

10. Susan Bednarczyk and Jean Rice, "Five Years Later-Looking at the Cable Access Experiment," in The Cable/Broadband Communications Book, 1977-78, Mary Louise Hollowell, ed. (Washington: Communications Press, Inc., 1977).

11. CRTC, "Policies Respecting Broadcasting Receiving Undertaking (Cable Television)," (CRTC: Ottawa, 1975) p. 9-14.

12. CRTC, "Local Programming on Cable Television," op. cit.p.47.

13. Theodora Sklover, op. cit., p. 332.

14. CRTC, "Policies Respecting Broadcasting Receiving Undertaking," op. cit., p. 47.

15. David Othmer, op. cit., p. 8.

Footnotes(cont)

16. See "A Story About People" (Reading, Pennsylvania: Alternate Media Center- Berks Cable Co.).

17. Bednarczk and Rice, op.cit., p. 68.

18. Vernone Sparkes, "Community Cablecasting in the U.S. and Canada: Different Approaches to a Common Objective" Journal of Broadcasting, 20: 451-460.

19. See for example, "Who's Who in Corporate Television," Videography, February 1977, p. 21f.